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SUBJECT: PANAMA: IMPROVED COOPERATION WITH COLOMBIA AS THE
GOP GETS TOUGH

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Classified By: Ambassador Barbara J. Stephenson for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Colombia's implementation of a new security doctrine that emphasized improved governance on its border with Panama had facilitated cross-border cooperation, Panama's National Security Advisor Marcel Salamin told POLOFF on January 20. In a January 27 conversation, he told POLOFF that he had asked the Colombians to re-cast the confrontation with the FARC along the Panamanian-Colombian border into one against narco-terrorism and illegal trafficking, so as to avoid Panamanian sensibilities about getting involved in internal Colombian disputes. At the same time, he said that he wished Colombia would become a partner in defending the Canal by signing the Neutrality Treaty, citing Venezuela as a possible threat. In an attempt to decapitate the violent criminal networks in Panama, Salamin said that President Torrijos had ordered Panamanian security forces to start arresting all the gang leaders, capos and members of illegal logistical networks in Panama, adding that the operation would take several weeks. He said that the GOP intended to use the new National Frontier Service (SENAFRONT) to re-occupy the Darien to tie down the FARC, which was becoming a greater threat to Panama as it devolved into a criminal organization. He also asked for USG help with the Panamanian Customs Service's Risk Analysis Unit to help it become an effective law enforcement tool. He inquired whether the USG would approach the Government of Ecuador to protest its visa policy; Salamin was convinced that Ecuador's lax visa policy contributed to the recent phenomenon of Somalis and other East Africans turning up in Panama. Finally, Salamin defended last year's security reforms as an attempt to civilianize the security services, not militarize them. End Summary.

Panama and Colombian Meeting of the Minds

12. (S//NF) Following the successful conclusion of the Colombian-Panama-Mexico-Guatemala quadrilateral security meeting on January 16 (see reftel A), Panamanian National Security Advisor Marcel Salamin told POLOFF on January 20 that Panama's ability to cooperate with Colombia began to improve approximately one year ago, following a change in Colombian strategy in the border area. He said that previously, the GOC had a very military approach to the border with Panama and had pushed the GOP to adopt a similar strategy on their side of the border. Salamin asserted that Panama could not respond to this request because it did not have a military and its security forces did not have the manpower to carry out such a strategy effectively. As a result, Panama had limited cross-border cooperation. According to Salamin, about a year ago the GOC changed its tactics on the border, and began taking a more civilian approach, including deploying police into the border region and using civilian agencies to improve services and governance. Since then the GOC has reduced the military representation on the Colombian-Panamanian border commission (COMBIFRON) to military intelligence, while increasing the police and civilian representation. Salamin said it was much easier for Panama to cooperate with such a strategy, and that Panama would actually like to mirror the GOC campaign to improve governance on its side of the border as well.

13. (S//NF) On January 27 Salamin told POLOFF of a conversation he had had with a high-level Colombian official during the previous week in which he, Salamin, had asked that the GOC stop trying to get the GOP to support the GOC's aggressive FARC rhetoric. Salamin said he told the official that the Panamanian people were prepared to support actions against narco-terrorism, drug smuggling and gun running in Panama, and that the discourse on the FARC should be oriented in that direction where Panama was concerned in order to build up broad public support for tough measures against the FARC. He said the GOC official he spoke with accepted his argument.

Colombia and Neutrality

14. (S//NF) Salamin said he considered it very important for Colombia to sign the Neutrality Treaty. He said up to now Colombia had refused because Colombia interpreted the treaty as meaning that Panama would be neutral on Colombia's internal conflict with the FARC. Salamin said this was a mistake, and that the treaty only committed Colombia to help protect the neutrality of the Canal. He said the Canal was very important for Colombia, as the quickest way to move goods and forces from Colombia's Caribbean coast to its Pacific coast. Salamin said Colombia should realize that Chavez's boast of a few years ago that his Russian planes could "protect the Canal" was in fact a threat to the Canal, and that Colombia needed to stand with Panama in the face of Venezuelan threats to regional stability.

Law Enforcement Offensive

15. (S//NF) Referring to the GOP's resolve to tackle the drug-trafficking networks in Panama, Salamin said President Torrijos had given orders to the security services to "arrest all the gang leaders, drug capos, and the members of logistic networks in Panama, whoever they may be." He specifically mentioned groups linked to Don Mario (Colombian ex-paramilitary leader) who he said had links to the FARC. He said this was a major operation that would go on for weeks. He cited the seizure the day before of 800 kilos of cocaine and "a lot of weapons" as the initial phase of the effort. Post will monitor progress of this effort and report septel.

SENAFRONT and the Darien

¶6. (S//NF) On the Darien, Salamin said that the GOP intended for the new independent National Frontier Service (SENAFRONT) to take a more aggressive posture than the Panamanian National Police (PNP) Frontier Directorate (DINAFRONT) had done. According to Salamin, the FARC had in the past maintained a gentlemen's agreement with Panama, whereby the FARC did not intervene in Panama, and Panama did not confront the FARC. This was based on strategic considerations, and it was the FARC's internal discipline that prevented FARC elements from committing serious criminal acts inside Panama for the most part, Salamin explained. According to Salamin, this agreement had broken down as the FARC lost command and control of its forces, that were now acting outside the control of the Secretariat. The GOP had to take a more aggressive stance in defense of its sovereignty. Salamin asserted that the FARC and their collaborators conducted criminal activities, including kidnapping, inside Panama. DINAFRONT had a largely passive presence in the Darien, with its men "hiding in Meteti and the larger towns", according to Salamin. He said SENAFRONT was created to be a quasi-military institution willing to make the "sacrifices" necessary for the security of the country. Asked if SENAFRONT would: 1) plan to react from their base in Meteti; 2) use mobile patrols to increase their presence; or 3) re-deploy closer to the border to physically reoccupy the border area, Salamin said that SENAFRONT could use all three tactics, but for the most part it would reoccupy territory. He said the key to this would be the use of helicopters and boats to give SENAFRONT the ability to quickly reinforce or evacuate posts, so they would not be left alone to face the FARC. He said that SENAFRONT now needed to be given the training and equipment to carry out its mission and be more assertive. He

noted that Panama was now much more important to the FARC than before the recent resurgence of the Colombian military, and the FARC's loss of territory in Colombia. He said that if the FARC felt there was a real threat to their ability to operate in the Darien, they might strike back, including attempting to kidnap SENAFRONT troops.

Help Requested for Customs Unit

¶7. (S//NF) Salamin said he was concerned about the Panamanian Customs Service's Risk Analysis Unit (UAR), and asked the Embassy for assistance. He said that the GOP was trying to get the Customs Service to focus more on its law enforcement mandate, to fight illegal trafficking in drugs, guns, money and people, and less on trying to stop traditional smuggling to avoid tariffs. He said a key part of this strategy was the UAR. This unit was set up to look for anomalies that might reveal criminal activities in international commerce. He said the director of the unit, Soreya Valdevilleso, had the government's full support, but that she was being undermined by the Deputy Director of Customs. He said the entire unit needed to be poligraphed on a continual basis, because the unit was penetrated by criminal organizations. He asked the Embassy for help, and said we should work through National Intelligence and Security Service (SENIS) Director Erik Espinosa.

The Somalis are Coming

¶8. (C) Salamin said that Panama was very concerned with East African immigrants, especially Somalis, who are turning up in Panama. He said some of the Somalis had scars from bullet wounds, indicating they had been in combat. He blamed Ecuador's open visa system, that he said was causing major problems for Colombia and Panama. He said Ecuador was refusing to accept the illegal immigrants when caught by Colombia or Panama. Salamin said someone needed to talk to Ecuadorian President Correa about this, and suggested that this might be better done by Panama than either the U.S. or Colombia. He described Correa as a "tisico" (someone with tuberculosis) who coughs all over the place contaminating

others.

What Security Reform Was Supposed to Look Like

¶9. (C) Salamin, who was one of the major drivers behind the security reforms approved in August (see reftel B), told POLOFF on January 20 that the security laws were actually an attempt to complete the civilianization of the security forces, rather than their militarization as opponents claimed (see reftel C). He explained that under Omar Torrijos, there had been a large police force, with a small military force in reserve. Later, Noriega reversed the percentages, building a large military force to take over the defense of the Canal after U.S. military forces withdrew. After Operation Just Cause, the Panamanian Defense Forces were disbanded, but most of the members were folded into the new police forces. Also, no new police doctrine was imposed. According to Salamin, ever since then the Panamanian security services had resisted the idea that they were really police services because their leadership was made up of former military officers. This had led to the use of military tactics in policing, such as maintaining a large force in reserve and staging large "operations" to sweep up criminals. At the beginning of the Torrijos Administration, Salamin said, the GOP decided to change the security doctrine to one of "Citizen Security." The idea was that Panama's security services would concentrate on internal security problems, while relying on the U.S. and the international community to defend the Canal from external threats. This became enshrined in the design of the Panamax exercises with their internal Panamanian Alpha phase, and their external and international Beta phase. Panama would then turn its security forces into pure law-enforcement organizations, and target criminal and terrorist threats to Panama and the Canal. The security reforms were designed to reinforce this change, especially the creation of the National Aero-Naval Service (SENAN), which was designed to end the pretensions of the National Air Service (SAN) to be an air force and of the National Maritime Service (SMN) to be a navy, and to force them both to take on their law enforcement roles that they had, according to Salamin, attempted to avoid to that point. He said it was very important as well that the National Police (PNP) adopt a community policing model to replace the current police model. He said he strongly supported the current NAS-funded community policing program, which will be funded from Merida Initiative funds next year.

Comment

¶10. (S//NF) After disappearing from the political scene for some time, due to his wife's illness and a time in the private sector, Marcel Salamin is back as President Torrijos' National Security Advisor. It seems likely that his job in the last five months of the Torrijos Administration is to oversee an effort to turn around the story line that Torrijos lost control of the security situation in Panama. This narrative threatens Torrijos chances of being reelected president in 2014, as he hopes to do after a constitutional reform to be proposed shortly. Rather than blaming Colombians for all the crime in Panama and demanding the imposition of visas for Colombians, as the main presidential candidates have done, Salamin reached out to the GOC to launch an initiative, the quadrilateral meeting, that could have genuine results. Salamin's effort to get the GOC to modify its rhetoric so that Panama can more easily work with it is also a welcome change, brought on by a realization that while the increasing crime in Panama's streets threatens Torrijos' political future, the morphing of the FARC into a criminal band threatens to unleash a wave of kidnapping and violence that could threaten Panama's economic vibrancy - largely based on its image as a refuge of calm amidst the violence and uncertainty of its neighbors.

¶11. (S//NF) As for the tough talk on gang leaders, drug

traffickers and the FARC, Post is concerned that the GOP may be taking on more than it can chew at once. While we strongly encourage the GOP to recognize the real threats it faces and take action against them, such as the quadrilateral meeting, the GOP does not have a lot of high level security expertise beyond Salamin, who cannot possibly oversee all these initiatives. As the GOP forces more aggressive measures through its very limited security bureaucracy, the risk of a blunder grows. Post will attempt to leverage all USG resources at its disposal to assist the GOP and make sure that it does not lead with its chin.

¶12. (S//NF) The issue of Colombia signing the Neutrality Treaty is an old hobby horse of Salamin's, and does not resonate widely within the GOP.
STEPHENSON